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ICELANDIC LITERATURE.

IN his condensed compendium of mediæval and modern Icelandic literature, Dr. Finnur Jónsson admits that the Icelandic people have at no time displayed any marked tendency toward philosophical thought. This is also a widely accepted estimate among well-informed circles of the European continent, and it cannot be denied that the native historians of our national literature still neglect a series of important problems, among them the ethnological research of the prehistoric heterogeneous elements that have contributed to impart such a quaint and different aspect to the literature of Iceland. It seems sufficient to the native critics that Iceland's literary records will forever exert an irresistible fascination upon the modern nations, and that Icelandic literature in our day should have become one of the best exploited literatures of Europe.

As regards the heterogeneous origin of old Icelandic records, it is to be regretted that modern ethnologists, and above all the Icelanders themselves, should have done so little to have cleared up the remote prehistoric contact which must have taken place between Teutonic-Scandinavian tribes and the Finns,—men belonging to, perhaps, the highest type of the old Finno-Altaic race. The “hersirs” and tribal chiefs of Norway until the days of Harold Fairhair are admitted by several modern ethnologists to have been to a considerable extent “Norwegianised” or “Teutonised” Finns, who at the time still preserved several traits of their Asiatic-Tartar origin; and that these were the foremost emigrants to Iceland at the close of the ninth century of our era. The mythological and heroical traditions which these Norwegian-

ised Finns brought with them to Iceland, point to racial traditions which do not exhibit marked Teutonic elements. It is creditable to Iceland that many of these weird racial traditions have been preserved, but it was to be expected that at a later time they should be misunderstood and greatly distorted, particularly by the clerical Celtic-Icelandic scribes. The best preserved mythical and prehistoric sagas were those handed down orally by the popular saga-men for the entertainment of young and old, concerning old-time battles fought far inland in the East of Europe,—weird sagas, rude in form and contents, about kings and heroes, very unlike the Scandinavian kings and warriors of a later saga-time,—about mysterious potentates like King “Guðmundr á Glæsisvöllum”—King Gudmund of Splendid Plains—by which may have been meant the inland steppes to the southwest of the Ural mountains. Even the old Eddic lays, for which there is still lacking any satisfactory ethnological and critical interpretation, may have been evenly divided between Tartar and Teuton. It is certain that the contents and purport of the huge collection known under the title of “*Antiquités russes*,” edited at Copenhagen by the noted Danish antiquarian, Professor Rafn, must read like an unintelligible riddle to modern Icelanders and Scandinavians; and yet, it recalls to mind a recent incident at a session of the Icelandic “Althing” or Parliament. A member of the assembly was heard to encourage modern Finnish immigration as a desirable offset to the injury which American emigration was causing to the Icelanders.

This was an admission of a remote racial affinity, and, in fact, many Icelanders and Scandinavians may apply to themselves the recurring refrain addressed to Ottar in a lay in the aforementioned collection—“*Antiquités russes*”:

“Alt er það ætt þín,
Ottarr hinn heimski!”
“It is all your family,
Oh thou foolish Ottar!”

In mediæval Iceland there were no cities or villages proper. The leaders of the immigrant families, whether Norwegian Finns,

pure Teutons, or Norse-Celtic immigrants from the British isles, had settled widely apart on the banks of fjords, along inland valleys, in every available locality. Each had imported their own peculiar traditions and independent saga circles, and for a time led their own lives without very close ties of solidarity between the several ethnic groups. But our modern world has not an adequate idea of the astonishing literary activity, which, during the following centuries, must have reigned in the then wealthy homes of Iceland, at the respective Episcopal Sees of Hólar and Skálholt, in the famous school of Oddi, and in all the convents of the Island. The surprising wealth of manuscripts still existing in the Island in the centuries following upon the reformation forms a rich legacy bequeathed by Iceland to the world at large. The "*Habent fata sua libelli*" applies to the providential preservation of all these Icelandic manuscripts. While Icelandic annals relate the plundering of the treasures of Icelandic Episcopal Sees by the Teutonic reformers, it seems that the latter attributed little value to any kind of manuscripts. In Iceland, however, these accumulated literary treasures would have been lost to the world had not the patriotic Iclander Arni Magnússon conceived the idea of exporting the entire collection *en bloc* to Copenhagen, Denmark. In this connection we have to bear in mind the utter oblivion, neglect, and decay into which Iceland had sunk under the semi-barbaric government during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. At Copenhagen, however, fortunately there happened at the time to be found noble-minded, far-sighted Danes,—men like Luxdorph, A. Suhm, Schöning, Engelstoft, the native Iclander and Danish Premier Jón Eriksson, and others.

To the intelligent initiative of all these men mediæval Icelandic literature owes its first introduction to the European world in a series of splendid editions of the Eddic lore and of the most important saga texts, the expense of which was liberally defrayed by the Danish monarchs themselves, and this ought also to be considered as the first genuine step taken toward a national Icelandic literary revival. The Iclander of the early saga period remained

still a man of action, who merely had exchanged the sword for the pen. Whether "Skáld" or "raconteur" saga man, he was prompted either by family pride, or inspired by events leading to the triumph or defeat of some party, but during the golden period of Icelandic literature, from Ari Thorgilson down to the historians of the thirteenth century, the literature has been changed essentially both in form and in utterance under the Celtic, clerical culture of the times. The brilliant historian Snorri Sturluson and his contemporary historians, several of them the inmates of Icelandic convents, belonged to this classical school. It is the only period in which Icelandic literature displays something of inward continuity and of philosophical thinking. All of the writers of this period, in style and utterance, aimed at the "Romanisation" of the old Norse language. They even applied it to several older saga texts; but, not by any means, so intelligently to the mythical saga lore; yet, here I do not expressly allude to either the young or old Eddic texts. The Romanisation, however, put its stamp upon some of the old family sagas, such as the "Níál's Saga,"—regarded by critics as a prominent type of a racy Icelandic saga. The dialogue, for example, between Flosi and his relation Hildigunnr reads like any creditable specimen of impassioned Roman rhetoric. This classical tendency may be said to have advanced one step further in the charming "Biskupa-Sögur" or lives of Icelandic bishops before the Reformation. These "Biskupa-Sögur," by their style and language, read like highly attractive modern biographies. The modern natives shrink from the apparently naïve faith which inspired the mediæval works, like the "Biskupa Sögur," or religious poems, as the strenuous poem "Lilja," by the monk Eystein Asgrimsson; but the Icelanders are apt to forget that, besides naïve faith, those works are also inspired by the same lofty aspirations which prompted the deeper modern thinkers to recognise the in-born ethical cravings of mankind as high above any worldly wise logical ideas. For the rest, at a later period of uncommon national distress—the "Volœðis" period of the seventeenth century—the broken-hearted, contrite Icelandic people, although nominally

Lutherans, returned to that early fountain-head of naïve Icelandic faith; from an analogous source, likewise, was inspired the great seventeenth century psalmist, Hallgrim Pétursson, and others who sought for spiritual strength and faith in the destinies of the Icelandic people.

As regards the existence and intrinsic value of modern Icelandic literature, foreigners need no longer abide by the efforts of native Icelandic writers, but may be referred to men and women of different European nationalities who have made the Icelandic language and literature a favorite object of study. Of those residing in Germany I shall here mention only the names of M. Phil. Carl Küchler, Fräulein M. Lehmann Filhes of Berlin, and, above all, Poëstion, the distinguished Vienna librarian and worthy translator, critic, and historian of modern Icelandic literature. Modern Icelandic literature in our own day still may produce the impression of a series of unequal, incomplete efforts devoid of continuity and originality, except, perhaps, in its short story and lyrical poetry. But we should remember that there had to be performed a long and arduous preliminary work, mainly philological and linguistic, before there could be any modern national literature.

Until nearly the middle of the nineteenth century none but Icelandic students at Copenhagen were available for the work of reading, correcting, and translating the manuscripts which Arni Magnusson had given the Royal Library at Copenhagen. And this, at a time when in Iceland the native language had practically ceased to exist, or to be the official medium for transacting public business. An abominable Danish-Icelandic jargon was largely spoken by the upper classes. A practical Icelandic grammar did not exist in Iceland until the well-known Danish linguist Rasmus Rask introduced his own short Icelandic grammar in the early decades of the nineteenth century. A few years later the Icelanders also formally date their modern literary revival from the foundation of the review *Fjölnir* at Copenhagen, by a group of gifted and patriotic natives. The articles of the *Fjölnir*, in a short time, seem to have revolutionised both the spoken and written lan-

guage of Iceland. I here refrain from entering into details, but again refer the reader to Poëstion's work, or to Dr. V. Guðmundsson's Danish treatise, *Island's Kultur ved Aarhundredskiftet*, 1900, translated into German by R. Pallaske. The old literature of Iceland, in a multitude of aspects, and in its highest classical form, was mainly the outcome of Celtic-Icelandic genius, and of the classical Christian culture of the time.

In the present literary stagnation and even widespread indifference to past literary traditions which is said to prevail in Iceland, it is well to recall to mind that of the 20,000 emigrants, who in late years have settled in America, the majority probably has been made up of Icelanders of Celtic descent. The *American-Icelandic Press* of Winnipeg, Manitoba, occasionally keeps reminding Iceland of this fact. Some of the quaint poems of the Icelandic-American poet Stephan G. Stephansson, in rather drastic language, seem to express the genuine sentiments of a self-confessed modern Icelandic Celt. The Iceland of to-day, according to this writer, is only a sort of "Teutonised" Iceland, dull, realistic, and utilitarian; and apparently he is not "in touch" with the time-serving faction of Dano-Icelandic *chauvinists*, who affect to seek an imagined center of intellectual, political, and racial solidarity in the mediæval literature of Iceland. But on the other hand it is only too true that modern Iceland is actually confronted by a number of perplexing and difficult, political and economical problems; and for the satisfactory solution of these we devoutly trust that Jove will grant to the long-abiding island all the required life through the ages.

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